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Reading Aloud: Poetry at Its Finest

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Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

Reading Aloud: Poetry at Its Finest

Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words.

—Edgar Allan Poe

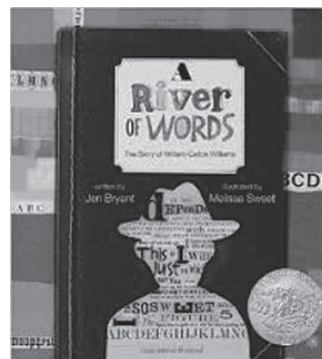
As I write this column, the literary world has just lost two great poets: Dr. Maya Angelou and Mr. Walter Dean Myers. I can hear their deep, lovely voices as I review books written in verse, but I find myself gravitating toward books actually meant for much younger readers. When the American Academy of Pediatrics released a statement about the importance of reading aloud to young children in June 2014 (Rich), those of us in education nodded in agreement. We know that “reading, as well as talking and singing, is viewed as important in increasing the number of words that children hear in the earliest years of their lives” (Rich). Perhaps this seems obvious to us, as educators, because we have leaders in the field who have been encouraging us to read aloud to our classrooms as early as the 1980s (Lesesne 52). Yet, this information seems new to the public. I am left wondering, Should we ever stop reading aloud to our students?

When I taught my “ninth-grade Poetry Unit,” my students

seemed most engaged when it was taught *out loud*. My students preferred to read aloud; to hear the musicality embedded in the words; and to even get up out of their seats and perform some of the poetry we studied. Because poetry is so dense, it can seem like the perfect time to slow down the pace of teaching and learning, and simply appreciate the words. When we talk about objectives and goals for lessons (and units) it’s difficult to pinpoint an abstract goal such as *appreciation*; how would we assess appreciation? In an article in *English Journal*, Stephen Dreher addressed the challenges of a heterogeneous classroom (50). One of the methods he exercised was giving the students an opportunity to listen to complex readings. He set out to model the joy of reading and essentially uncovered a great truth: “We all love to be read to, to allow our minds and imaginations to sink into a great story” (53).

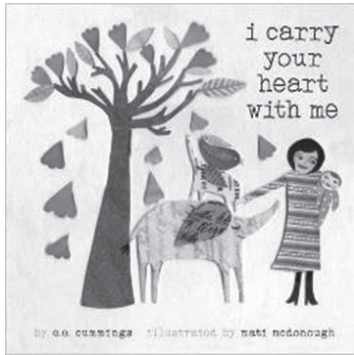
There have been some excellent books released recently for young readers that focus on “classic” poems. In this column, I suggest considering the power of these books in your secondary classroom.

A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams, written by Jen Bryant and illustrated by Melissa Sweet, is a gorgeously illustrated picture book that tells



the story of William Carlos Williams. There is so much more to his story as a poet than what appears in a high school English textbook. *A River of Words* is a lovely way to supplement the background information about this particular poet. His poetry is seamlessly incorporated into the narrative. Students would be utterly engaged by starting with this book as an introduction to his life and poetry.

Similarly, *i carry your heart with me*, the classic poem by E. E. Cummings, is illustrated here by Mati McDonough. The poem itself remains intact, while the eclectic collage work seems to bring the poem to life. The reader can visualize a specific interpretation of the poem as it represents the relationship between mother and child. This type of picture book would make an excellent mentor text at the secondary level; stu-



dents could explore other poems and likewise illustrate their own personal interpretation.

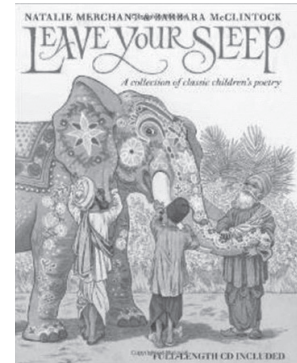
Another standout poetry anthology is *Firefly July*, written by Paul B. Janeczko and illustrated by Melissa Sweet. Again, brilliant illustrations accompany short, powerful poetry. Because Janeczko organized this anthology by season, I immediately thought about reading aloud throughout the school year. Sometimes, poetry is relegated to a specific unit, taught at a specific part of the school year; for me, it was April (National Poetry Month). I would love to go back and revise that approach and sprinkle poetry throughout a school year. How lovely for students to pause and reflect and simply bask in the glory of words.


At the 2012 NCTE Annual Convention, musician and poet Natalie Merchant shared her latest project with us. She spent several years researching poets and poems to compile a collection that she named *Leave Your Sleep*. Barbara McClintock illustrates this stunning and diverse collec-

tion of poetry. As a bonus, the book comes with an audio recording of the poetry, set to music, as Natalie Merchant has interpreted them. This collection incorporates several classic poems, some well known, others obscure. Regardless of a particular poem's popularity, each poem features an illustration and accompanying music. This is truly a lovely anthology that should not be missed.

While this issue is dedicated to poetry, I think that poetry can (and should) be taught throughout the year. As Rita Dove said, "Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful." We may celebrate National Poetry Month in April, but the power of words can (and should) be with us persistently.

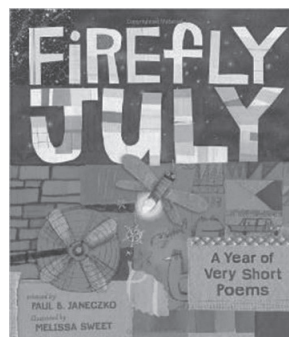
Poetry was written to be read aloud in most cases and carries with it performativity. Surely, teachers who prevent poetry from being read aloud are preventing full engagement with the poem as the author intended. As Josephine Hart states, "Poetry, this trinity of sound, sense and sensibility . . . gives voice to experience in a way



like no other literary art form." Should poetry be out of your comfort zone, I'd suggest taking a look at the abundant resources at www.poetryfoundation.org. 

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